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Community Unites to Help West Valley City Boy Living with Muscular Dystrophy

West Valley City – Austin Bennett is a bright, happy eight-year old boy. Like most little boys his age, he loves playing video games and pretending to be a super hero. He loves motorcycles and swimming, and he especially loves playing with his friends. Austin's favorite foods are tacos and sour candy, and his favorite color is green. In fact, if you ask him, his favorite animal is the alligator. Why? Because "any animal that is green has to be pretty cool." Unlike most boys his age, though, Austin is living with a degenerative and ultimately fatal disease – Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy.

When Austin was diagnosed in early 2008, his parents Karalee and Cody were faced not only with the uncertainty of their little boy's future, but with the reality that the home their family was living in wasn't suitable for Austin's needs. The family's split-entry home requires that Austin's parents carry him up and down the stairs every day – an ever-increasing challenge, as Austin is growing beyond his mother's ability to carry him.

"We faced a number of challenges when we started realizing the scope of the situation," says Austin's mother Karalee Bennett. "We love our home, and we love our neighbors. We didn't want to uproot our children from their schools, and we didn't want to move them away from their friends. Even if we did move to a single-level home, we would have to make accommodations for a wheelchair."

With few resources and no idea how to cope with this challenge, Austin's parents turned to neighbor Arden Hess, owner of Hess Construction. "I just wanted to know what, if anything, we could do to our house to make it work for Austin," continues Karalee.

From there, Hess took the lead. Within weeks, he had rallied the neighbors, developed a blueprint for a remodeled, wheelchair-accessible home, contacted suppliers, assembled a crew of volunteers, and had provided a way for the Bennetts to stay in their home. More importantly, he had done all of this at no cost to the Bennetts. Through the support and generosity of neighbors, friends, and caring strangers, the project would be completed through donations.

"This is a very special little boy," says Arden Hess. "If I can take my expertise, utilize my resources, and make a difference in this family's life, that's all the payment I need."

With donated materials, and a dedicated team of friends, family and strangers, the Bennett's home is being renovated from the inside out. The front door will be widened and the front porch extended to accommodate a ramp. The main floor of the home will be renovated to include a master bedroom connected to a bedroom for Austin with a shared bathroom in between. The hallways will be widened. The kitchen will be renovated to include a special eating area and sink for Austin to access from a wheelchair. A new deck in the back of the home will allow the family to relax together, and most importantly, an elevator will be installed to allow Austin to enjoy his home without relying on his parents carrying him up and down the stairs.

"Everything we're doing to the home will make it not only accessible, but comfortable for the entire family," continues Hess. "The Bennetts will have a beautiful home that they can enjoy for many years."

Members of the media are invited to join the family and the team of volunteers tomorrow, Friday July 17, at 2:00 p.m. at the Bennett home (3706 South Ginny Drive, West Valley City) as the concrete is poured for the family's new front porch. This is the first major change to the Bennett home, and is just one of many to come.

Please call Aaron Crim at (801) 232-0466 to confirm attendance at this event or for more information about this inspirational and exciting project.

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